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RR RUEHWEB

DE RUEHNJ #0462/01 0881407
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 291407Z MAR 06
FM AMEMBASSY NDJAMENA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 3410
INFO RUEHUJA/AMEMBASSY ABUJA 1001
RUEHAR/AMEMBASSY ACCRA 0300
RUEHDS/AMEMBASSY ADDIS ABABA 0666
RUEHBP/AMEMBASSY BAKAKO 0544
RUEHKM/AMEMBASSY KAMPALA 0344
RUEHKH/AMEMBASSY KHARTOUM 0082
RUEHLC/AMEMBASSY LIBREVILLE 0739
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1238
RUEHNM/AMEMBASSY NIAMEY 2519
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 1625
RUEHYD/AMEMBASSY YAOUNDE 0998
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0630

UNCLAS NDJAMENA 000462

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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: CHAD: INTERIOR MINISTER SEES DEBY AS "LEAST BAD,"
EXULTS IN BATTLE VICTORY

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Close Deby advisor and fellow Zaghawan Interior Minister Mahamat Ali described Deby as the "least bad" option for Chad, in conversation with Ambassador March 28. Claiming total victory in the March 20 battle against the Chadian Zaghawa rebels, he downplayed anxieties over intra-Zaghawa bloodletting, poohpoohed the importance of other Chadian rebels, and dismissed the likelihood of direct Sudan attack. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Ambassador Wall called on Minister of Territorial Administration Mahamat Ali Abdallah Nassour March 28. Mahamat Ali is one of Deby's closest advisors, a fellow Zaghawan but not of the same clan (Mahamat Ali is a Kobe from Iriba rather than Bideiyat from Bahai), who as a military leader was instrumental in Deby's original conquest of power in 1990 and has served in key postings ever since. Mahamat Ali had just returned from the East, where he accompanied Deby in overseeing the March 20 battle at Hadjar Marfaine.

Deby the Least Bad

¶3. (SBU) Taking a line on the internal political situation sounding strikingly similar to the views regularly purveyed by the French, Mahamat Ali three times, at different points during the conversation, emphasized that President Deby was the "least bad" option realistically available to Chad, a country he described as extremely difficult to govern and hold together. He said he hoped for the understanding of the international community, at a time when rebellions were flaring in the East and even the South, to bear with Chad during its present election, however imperfect the electoral process was. For all the flaws of Deby's governance, Mahamat Ali said, he had maintained stability and brought some progress to Chad, when compared to where Chad had been when Deby came to office. The political opposition had, he said, been enticed into a stubborn boycott partly by the prospect of a Zaghawa rebellion and a hope that the international community would put pressure on Deby not to go forward with the election. The opposition's demands were unrealistic.

The government had always been prepared for dialogue, within reasonable limits, and the door remained open. In fact, if Deby won the coming election overwhelmingly, he would still want to associate the opposition in realistic improvements to the electoral system. Mahamat Ali was unfazed by the opposition's call for obstructing the election.

¶4. (SBU) The Ambassador said that the United States had hoped there would be a more credible election. We would have liked to provide assistance for the upcoming election, as requested by the Prime Minister, but the organization of a credible election, as set forth in recommendations made a year previously by the United Nations Development Program, would have required more time than was now available. The government not having taken the required measures, it was too late now for support from the international community. The Ambassador said that President Deby deserved credit for maintaining a period of relative stability and some economic progress in Chad. The United States was grateful for Chad's cooperation on combatting errorism. In the Ambassador's view, however, Deby would enhance prospects for Chad's continued stability and be widely viewed as a great African chief of state if he put in place in Chad a credible process of peaceful transition.

¶5. (SBU) Mahamat Ali said that he "fully shared" the Ambassador's view. Chad could have done better. However, if Deby resigned or passed the scene, the result would be war, not enhanced democracy. It was essential for the international community to take an understanding attitude and accompany Deby in this mandate so the country would not fall into the abyss. After some time, Deby contemplated an alternation of power. Mahamat Ali was certain that Deby thought in this way. He did not have limitless ambition. Deby understood the need to associate the opposition in governance. One area for improvement was voter registration. Mahamat Ali said he had proposed to Deby and the Prime Minister a new voter census, indeed, a new general census. The present figure of 5.5 million registered voters was indeed very high for a country projected to have only nine million inhabitants; however, Mahamat Ali suspected that Chad's population was actually much higher, more than 12 million, just as N'djamena's estimated 600,000 population was likely also well over one million.

Zaghawa Rebels Smashed, Others Do Not Matter

¶6. (SBU) Mahamat Ali said that the battle of Hadjar Marfaine on March 20 was a clarifying, watershed event. Sudan had poured in arms, vehicles, and money into various Chadian rebel groups in Darfur -- Bideiyat Zaghawa, Borogat Zaghawa, Arab, and Tama --, hoping they would mount a unified force that could overthrow Deby and undermine the Darfur rebellion.

Sudan would now have to think again. The most important of the rebel groups was the Bideiyat group under Yahya Dillo (SCUD) which had set up a forward base at Hadjar Marfaine (just inside Chad, north of Adre). The battle of March 20 totally obliterated that base and the SCUD was now in complete disarray. The Ambassador asked about the likelihood of further Zaghawa defections and reprisals, given that this battle was the first instance of intra-Zaghawa killing, and about the danger presented by other Chadian rebels such as Tama leader Mahamat Nour. Mahamat Ali dismissed Mahamat Nour as "no problem at all." If the Sudanese were banking on him, they were banking on the wrong man. Deby well knew where the real danger had lain -- the SCUD -- and he had gone after it.

Other rebels, Borogat, Tama, and Arab, would remain disunited and ineffective. Sudan wanted Mahamat Nour to lead them but they would not follow him. The intra-Zaghawa fighting was not mortal to the Zaghawa community. The great majority of that community knew full well that they needed to stick together behind Deby, help him remain in power, lead the country to greater democracy and better governance, combat corruption and build a truly national army.

¶7. (SBU) The Ambassador asked whether Mahamat Ali saw a risk

now of a direct attack from Sudan. Mahamat Ali said there was "very little likelihood" of it. Sudan's strategy was to work through the rebels. Chad held to its right to pursue Chadian rebels into Sudanese territory, which could lead to a Sudanese reaction, but he doubted that a direct attack formed part of Sudan's general plan. And as of March 20, the Sudanese plan would have to be re-written.

WALL